

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 21 November 2024
7.30pm

Leonkoro Quartet

Jonathan Schwarz violin
Amelie Wallner violin
Mayu Konoé viola
Lukas Schwarz cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in F Op. 50 No. 5 'The Dream' (1787)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Poco adagio • III. Menuetto.
Allegretto • IV. Finale. Vivace*

Judith Weir (b.1954)

String Quartet No. 2 'The Spaniard' (2023) *London première*
Co-commissioned by Wigmore Hall and Britten Pears Arts
*I. Animato • II. Tempo di Menuetto • III. Cantabile •
IV. Energico*

Interval

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 4 in E minor Op. 44 No. 2 (1837)
*I. Allegro assai appassionato • II. Scherzo. Allegro di
molto • III. Andante • IV. Presto agitato*

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Friedrich Wilhelm II's letter to **Haydn**, enclosing a gold ring in appreciation of the 'Paris' symphonies, was one of the composer's most treasured possessions. Haydn conveyed his 'thankfulness to His Majesty' by dedicating to him his set of six string quartets Op. 50, thereafter known as the 'Prussian'. The fifth Quartet was the last to be completed, sent to the publisher Artaria in mid-September 1787.

According to Floyd and Margaret Grave, with Op. 50, Haydn 'seems more intent on reclaiming the quartet as medium for connoisseurs'. As in the earlier Op. 33 quartets, these works up-end formal expectations, but not always to 'joke' effect. Instead, the Op. 50 quartets use unexpected harmonies and irregular structures to energise and surprise. For instance, the opening *Allegro moderato* of Op. 50 No. 5 begins starkly, with the two violins tripping out a simple melody in F major. Viola and cello answer recalcitrantly, with a dissonant C sharp. Throughout the remainder of the movement, this unsettling element persists, questioning the stability of the whole.

The B flat major second movement earned Op. 50 No. 5 the nickname 'The Dream'. The quartet players seem to fall into a kind of collective reverie, drifting into unexpected harmonic realms and fleeting thoughts. They are brought back to earth in the *Menuetto*, although the turns from major to minor in the central trio section suggest that a memory of alternative realms continues to haunt the whole. In the *Finale*, Haydn instructs the first violin to play their ascending melody on one string, enhancing the sense of flight and peril as the *Vivace* rondo whirls around and away, as if into the night.

Judith Weir's first string quartet was composed for the Endellion Quartet in 1990. Each of the three movements were based on song fragments that set medieval Spanish romances and a Scottish ballad. Weir's String Quartet No. 2, 'The Spaniard', was commissioned by Britten Pears Arts and Wigmore Hall for the Leonkoro Quartet, who gave the world première at the Aldeburgh Festival in June 2024.

Weir explains: 'Shortly after completing my Second Quartet, I realised that all of its formal features reminded me of moments from Beethoven's quartets. An edgy, conversational opening followed by a long cello tune; an athletic minuet and trio; a hymn-like slow movement; and a second scherzo for the finale, ending with an extended, impassioned coda. I hadn't intended to write a Beethoven homage; but neither was the resemblance to my favourite quartet composer a coincidence. So my subtitle is also an oblique reference to him. "The Spaniard" was Beethoven's nickname at home in Bonn, on account of his "short, stocky build" and "dark-brown facial complexion"; according to his Bonn contemporary and neighbour, Gottfried Fischer.'

Felix Mendelssohn returned to string quartet composition while on his honeymoon in 1837. What became Op. 44 No. 2 was drafted in the Black Forest and completed when he and his wife Cécile had returned to Frankfurt. Mendelssohn's newly-wedded happiness has been thought to have discouraged him from the romantic verve that characterised his Opp. 12 and 13 of a decade earlier. Mendelssohn's sister Fanny had written to her brother in 1835: 'we were young precisely during the last years of Beethoven, whose manner we readily and extensively assimilated. It is, however, entirely too agitating and forcible. You lived and composed your way through this ...'. And that sense of Felix Mendelssohn having 'composed himself through' his Beethoven period is evident in the more formally restrained and well-crafted, but no less inventive or energetic, Op. 44 quartets.

Op. 44 No. 2 is in E minor, anticipating the key of the Violin Concerto, with which it shares a similar opening texture, the first violin's arching melody rising above a restless syncopated accompaniment. Throughout, there is a tension between surging figuration – almost breaking free – and the looping returns of the lyrical main theme. A quicksilver *Scherzo*, its main theme marked by rapid-fire repeated notes seems characteristically Mendelssohnian, with its uneven phrasing adding a playful asymmetry to the music. The *Andante* is akin to another quintessential Mendelssohnian genre, the Song without Words: the first violin, again, elegantly rising above an undulating accompaniment. Something devilish drives the finale's rondo theme through to its conclusion – there is no brightening to the major, but a determination to pursue the journey to its end.

Mendelssohn revised Op. 44 No. 2 in 1839, having subsequently composed No. 3 (the day after it was completed, Cécile gave birth to their first child) and finally No. 1, in summer 1839. The three quartets were dedicated to the Crown Prince of Sweden, the future Oscar I. Mendelssohn was becoming well established not only as a composer but as a conductor and teacher, assuming considerable responsibilities at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. He directed a series of 'historical concerts' that promoted the music of JS Bach and Beethoven and his 'classical' mastery was increasingly acknowledged by his contemporaries. A sense of playing with history is apparent in the Op. 44 quartets, with the emphasis on play as much as on history. Composer and critic Robert Schumann likened Mendelssohn's chamber music from this period to Mozart: 'A smile hovers round his mouth, but it is that of delight in his art, of quiet self-sufficiency in an intimate circle...'

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